



## Washington Recreation & Park Association – 2021 Legislative Agenda

### *Introduction*

The COVID-19 pandemic that has crippled the United States since March has both taught and reinforced important lessons for Washingtonians. We have gained a newfound appreciation of the critical role that public health plays in our society – and we’ve seen the tremendous value that people place on visiting their local parks, trails, and open spaces. We clearly love our local parks, which is rewarding in many ways – yet at the same time daunting to parks professionals who faced major maintenance and operation backlogs *before* COVID-19 and are experiencing exacerbated funding deficits since then.

Going hand-in-hand with the recreational and public health benefits of local parks is the fact that they are an equal-access destination and experience for all segments of society regardless of their income, their race, their religion, or their sexual orientation. When you look at local parks through a social justice and equity lens, they shine brightly.

The positive attributes of local parks, combined with the challenges that go into maintaining and preserving them, help form the foundation for WRPA’s 2021 Legislative Agenda priorities. These are divided into Top Priorities, “Strong Support” items, issues for general support (or opposition), and a list of a few areas where WRPA seeks to collaborate with state agencies.

### *Top Priorities*

#### **\*Provide Local Parks and Recreation Agencies with new Funding Options to Address Vital M&O and Preservation Needs which only became more challenging under COVID-19**

*(Policy/Fiscal Bill)* Parks and recreation are outdoor, quality-of-life amenities that are highly valued by the public. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored for us the enormous appreciation Washington residents have for open spaces, parks, and trails that offer equal access and use opportunities no matter a person’s race, religion, income level, or sexual orientation. Parks and recreation provide activities that help us maintain physical health and well-being; protect open spaces and facilities that make our communities attractive and vibrant; and help sell homes. Just as importantly, local parks and recreation programs enhance jobs-creation and economic development efforts and build trail networks that connect our communities. But investments in local parks and recreation suffered during the Great Recession and have lagged behind areas such as public safety in the years afterward. A WRPA survey of parks agencies has shown a growing M&O deficit and backlog. In 2021, after narrowly failing to achieve passage of “local option funding” legislation in 2020, WRPA will again work with key lawmakers on a local options bill. At a minimum, the 2021 bill will allow parks and recreation agencies to take a .1 percent sales tax increase to voters and bond against new sales tax proceeds upon voter approval. A few parks and recreation agencies have this authority, but the overwhelming majority – including all Metropolitan Park Districts (MPDs) and Park Districts – do not.

#### **\*Actively participate in efforts to replace and recover lost revenue for parks and recreation agencies – while protecting existing resources**

*(Operating Budget)* Due to parks, programming and events closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, local parks and recreation agencies have suffered tens of millions of dollars in revenue losses. WRPA will actively work with organizations such as the Association of Washington Cities (AWC) and the Washington State Association of Counties (WSAC) to seek revenue replacement and/or revenue tools to enable recovery. This effort is taking place at both federal and state levels. WRPA will also work with others in outdoor recreation to protect *existing* resources from being diminished as state legislators seek to balance a budget that is projected to experience a four-year, \$8.8 billion shortfall.

**\*Actively promote a 2021-2023 Capital Budget with robust funding levels for key grant programs that significantly benefit parks and recreation and the Great Outdoors:**

*(Capital Budget)* Along with allies such as the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition (WWRC), members of the Outdoor Recreation Funding Roundtable, and the Big Tent Outdoor Recreation Coalition, WRPA will strongly promote a robust 2021-23 Capital Budget to ensure robust investments in grant programs that are critical for the vitality of local parks and recreation and the great outdoors. These include the Washington Wildlife & Recreation Program (WWRP), Youth Athletic Facilities (YAF), and Aquatic Lands Enhancement Account (ALEA). WRPA is in strong support of recommended \$140 million, \$11.3 million, and \$9.1 million funding levels for WWRP, YAF, and ALEA, respectively.

***Strongly Support***

**\*Helping Ensure Safe and Dependable Child Care Services for Washington Families**

*(Potential Operating Budget, Policy Bill(s))* During Summer and Fall 2020, WRPA actively worked alongside agencies such as Metro Parks Tacoma, Olympia, Lynnwood and others to ensuring temporary licensing authority was allowed and to ensure child care subsidies and COVID-19 emergency funding were available to assist parks and recreation agencies, for-profit, and non-profit providers to serve as state-authorized school-age child care providers. If these interim efforts transition into continued initiatives during the 2021 Session of the Legislature, WRPA is poised to strongly support them.

**\*Protecting Property Tax-Based Parks Districts and MPDs from “Pro-Rationing”**

*(Policy Bill)* During the 2021 Session, it is likely that lawmakers will sponsor bills to protect agencies such as the Vashon Park District and PenMet Parks from “pro-rationing” which could have the effect of lowering their allowable property tax rates and, in turn, decreasing revenues and levels of service. WRPA is prepared to strongly support bills on behalf of Vashon, PenMet, and other local parks agencies seeking to prevent pro-rationing. While the expectation is that these parks agencies lead such efforts, WRPA will endeavor to assist them.

**\*Protect Funding for Dedicated Accounts within the Capital Budget**

*(Capital Budget)* As the Legislature considers the 2021-23 Capital Budget, WRPA again urges lawmakers to refrain from diverting funding from dedicated accounts that are focused on funding outdoor recreation activities. WRPA also urges legislators to use these dedicated funds for their intended purposes and, to the maximum extent practicable, to avoid “bond backfills” that could put such funding in jeopardy. Dedicated accounts key to WRPA include the WWRP, YAF, and ALEA, as well as others including the Boating Facilities Program (BFP), Non-Highway Off-Road Vehicle Account (NOVA), and Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF).

**\*Advocate for Key “Healthy & Active Communities” Funding within the State Budget Process**

*(Capital, Transportation, Operating Budgets)* As part of its ongoing “Healthy and Active Communities” initiative begun several years ago, the WRPA will work to ensure adequate funding of grant programs and budgetary items that help youth and adults to live active and healthy lifestyles; enhance public health; and combat a growing obesity trend in Washington and across the country. WRPA supports these key budgetary items and wants to ensure that within expenditures, a strong role for parks and recreation is identified and included:

- Public Health District and “Healthiest Next Generation” funding -- Operating Budget;
- Bicycle and Pedestrian Grant, Safe Routes to Schools, “Complete Streets” and fuel-tax-distribution funding in the Transportation Budget;
- “No Child Left Inside” within the Operating Budget;
- ‘Target Zero’ programs run by the Washington Traffic Safety Commission;
- Dedicated accounts and grant programs in the Capital Budget such as WWRP, YAF, ALEA, NOVA, BFP.

**\*Be Poised to Support Legislation Promoting Parks- and Great Outdoors-Oriented Connections with Public Health**

*(Policy Bill)* During the 2020 Session, the Senate held a committee hearing on legislation (**SB 6637**) to create a business license for “wilderness therapy” programs that include behavioral health treatment by licensed providers. WRPA has met with the prime sponsor of SB 6637, expressing interest in the concept of tying outdoor activities to health outcomes. WRPA further suggested that the bill be expanded to include incentives for health care providers and insurance companies to work with local parks agencies on ways to “prescribe” parks and recreation activities as one pathway toward achieving better public health outcomes. If a 2021 bill is woven together that includes the ‘wilderness therapy’ and public parks ‘prescription’ incentives, WRPA will be prepared to support it.

***“Support/Oppose” Items***

*WRPA will be prepared to join others in 2021 in supporting the following:*

**\*Efforts to Address Mental Health, Homelessness, Affordable Housing**

*(Policy Bills, Budgetary Items)* WRPA will support efforts led by cities and counties, the Low-Income Housing Alliance, and others, to ensure the Legislature continues to provide funding and tools for local governments to address growing mental health, homelessness, and affordable housing crises in their communities. Local parks and recreation officials have an important service-collaboration role to play in addressing these issues.

**\*“Big Tent” Outdoor Recreation Coalition**

*(Budgetary, Policy Items)* WRPA supports the continued work of the “Big Tent” Outdoor Recreation Coalition, an umbrella organization comprised of several dozen outdoor retailers, non-profits, and others that seek to ensure Washington State recognizes and maximizes the economic, societal, tourism, and health benefits of outdoor recreation. WRPA is prepared to support 2021 legislative and budget efforts by the Big Tent Coalition.

### *Agency Collaboration Items*

1. **Statewide Trail Plan:** WRPA wants to provide support for efforts by the State Parks Commission, the Recreation & Conservation Office (RCO) and others to update the Statewide Trail Plan, to better coordinate state and local trails planning, to seek out coordinated trails funding, and to provide technical assistance as well as strategic input on construction and maintenance options to be utilized for local jurisdiction trail segments. In particular, WRPA would like to see the RCO's next update of the State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) be used to better integrate state and local trails planning, construction, maintenance, and funding.
2. **Collaboration with the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO):** In addition to further coordination on trails planning and funding, WRPA wants to team up with RCO on items that a panel of local parks professionals listed during a July 21 presentation to the Recreation and Conservation Funding Board (RCFB). They included ways to incentivize the development of more regionalized facilities, and to provide more tools for local parks agencies dealing with major maintenance and operations (M&O) funding challenges. WRPA hopes to form Work Groups of parks professionals to delve into these issues further and present future ideas to RCO.
3. **Discover Pass Fees:** WRPA is prepared to support 2021 legislation put forth either by Washington State Parks or by individual lawmakers to increase the annual Discover Pass fee from \$30 to \$35. The fee has not been adjusted since 2011. WRPA also supports legislative provisions allowing the State Parks and Recreation Commission to set the price of the Discover Pass and Day-Use Permits by administrative rule beginning July 1, 2023.